

'Weapon of War: Confessions of Rape in Congo'

A Step in the Right Direction

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The 2009 documentary 'Weapon of War' takes a harrowing journey to the heart of the rape crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Since 1996 the DRC has been ravaged by conflicts and unprecedented levels of sexual violence. The problem is particularly acute in the eastern Kivu provinces, which have been described by Human Rights Watch as 'the worst place to be a woman or a child'.

Despite a 2003 peace treaty, UN statistics have shown that sexual violence is still on the rise and they estimate that over 200,000 women and girls, as well as some men and boys have been raped during the conflict. The horror of this situation is compounded by a lack of healthcare and infrastructure, and a prevailing culture of impunity. The UN's Special Rapporteur on women described these brutal atrocities as being 'aimed at the complete physical and psychological destruction of women with implications for the entire society.'



Sexual violence in the DRC has received more international attention in recent years, however, it has tended to focus on women as victims rather than on men as perpetrators. Working with Congolese women is of vital importance, however neglecting to work with men too is to ignore the root causes of the rape crisis. Ilsa and Femke Van Velzen, set out to address this problem in 'Weapon of War', which provides unique insights into the minds of military perpetrators as they about the

One of the first things that becomes apparent from the confessions of these men is that, as was the case before the war, discrimination against women and girls underlies the violence towards them. Captain Basima of the Congolese Army describes how women are sexually objectified and that it is common "...if you want a woman then you can't control yourself any longer and you go and look for one immediately". Years of conflict in the DRC have fanned the flames of gender discrimination and normalised brutal sexual violence. Basima's wife Nabintu said that her husband was more violent with her while he fighting, "A soldier can leave the war behind at the front but sometimes the fight goes on at home from the trauma of war..."

The prolonged fighting has led to the disintegration of traditional Congolese authorities and community structures, which has resulted in widespread impunity for the perpetrators of sexual violence. None of the men featured in

the documentary seemed to consider that they could be prosecuted for their actions and IPS news have reported that, increasing numbers of civilians and peacekeepers are also committing acts of sexual violence alongside the many different armed groups in the DRC with almost complete impunity.

'Weapon of War' clarifies that aside from the 30,000 government soldiers in the DRC, there are around 50,000 rebel fighters in over 60 different armed groups. It suggests that sexual violence is perpetrated by all of these groups, and demonstrates how many use it systematically and strategically. Commander Taylor, of the rebel CNDP (National Congress for the Defence of the People), explained for example that, "*sexual violence was our big weapon...we did it as a way of provoking the Congolese government.... Sexual violence has led to the government wanting to negotiate with us.*" Even in the national army, where rape is not ostensibly a strategy of war, Basima believes that a general lack of clear orders encourages soldiers to rape and that there is an implicit order to "*go, fetch and party.*"

Soldiers were shown to use rape as a means of control and retribution within local communities. Basima confirmed that, "*if someone really wants to destroy you, he'll rape your wife. If soldiers or warlords conquer their enemy...they rape their women.*"

Rape destroys community structures, shatters families and ensures control over local people and resources. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has explained that women are often seen as responsible for rapes and are forced to either suffer in silence, or be ostracised by their families and friends. It is precisely this shame and societal devastation that makes rape such an effective weapon.

In addition, rape appears to serve as a bonding exercise or training for combatants in the DRC. Alain Kasharu, an ex-Mai Mai rebel, told the crew that when he raped women, his three best friends from the rebel group were always there with him. Basima explained that in these group rapes, "*...when you're done it's the next guys turn.*" In this way, extreme masculine identities are adopted and the collective nature of the rapes enables individual soldiers to feel removed from the responsibility of what they are doing.

'Weapon of War' also explores the fact that some groups in the DRC believe that certain sexual acts will bring them protection from injury or disease. Kasareka, a Mai Mai Simba Rebel, said that it was for this reason that they had killed a woman to, "*tattoo ourselves with magic... [we] cut off her breasts and genitals... [and] used the ashes for the tattoos...*" Kasareka then highlighted the effect of sustained violence on the rebels, "*We don't give a damn, that's how it goes in the army. I could murder my own father. Even my own mother. The army is about orders. There's no mercy.*"

As soldiers become increasingly brutalised by their violent existence, they appear to slip into a spiral of violence, in which they can commit remarkably cruel acts with greater frequency and ease. Alain Kasharu described how during his time with the rebels his "*...brains didn't work like normal people's do. I was like a wild beast. I had no conscience...*" Basima remembered how,

after raping 6 women during his time in the army, he began to drink a lot and smoke marijuana, which numbed his emotions and further fuelled the violence.

Smoking and drinking cannot, however, hold back the guilt and realisation forever. Most of the men featured in the documentary suffered from nightmares, flashbacks and post-traumatic stress disorder and had no outlet for their trauma. At the Sosame Fieles Oela Charite centre for psychotherapy, one agitated ex-soldier told the doctor that, *"if I talk about it a lot, I worry and have bad dreams at night... I want a medicine to heal me"*. Medication, however, is also not a long term solution. Alain Kasharu told the crew that if he does not take his medicine or listen to music as a distraction, *"I get the urge to rape again..."* The lack of space for or ability of combatants to deal with their experiences makes it harder for them to integrate back into society and increases the likelihood that they will rape again.

In repenting for his actions, reforming his life and becoming a pastor, Basima has set out to try and help others to do the same. He now runs group counselling and advice sessions for soldiers and ex-combatants to try and help them lead more stable, integrated and less violent lives. The featured session seemed to have a profound effect on the men present, particularly as Basima was able to lead by example and talk from experience. He was later shown conducting a church service on the issue, in order educate the congregation about the severity and consequences of rape. Openness and support of this nature is fundamental to turning the tide on sexual violence in the DRC.

Reconciliation between perpetrators and victims was also explored by 'Weapon of War' as part of a healing process. The film featured a meeting between Alain Kasharu and a woman that he had raped, with a mediator to guide their discussion. The woman was able to explain to Alain that, *"since I was raped its as if I've lost all my chances...you destroyed my whole life."* Alain had to opportunity to listen to her, ask for forgiveness, and offer a piglet to her as a way of supporting her livelihood. Following the discussion, the woman concluded that *"my heart is starting to heal...I'm very pleased that he realises we're human beings too"*. It is this final remark that seems so fundamental to tackling the root causes of violence against women in the DRC: a need to educate men and soldiers so that they understand that women are *"human beings too"*.

Urgent work in the DRC on tackling impunity, improving living conditions, resolving the conflict and caring for the victims of sexual violence *must* continue. However, if we fail to try and understand and work with the perpetrators of such violence, its root causes will remain untouched. 'Weapon of War' is an important and powerful step in this direction.

For more information on this documentary see:

<http://www.weaponofwar.nl/news.php>